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### GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO.

In the days of Queen Elizabeth most Englishmen of cultivation spoke Italian, the plots of most of the plays were taken from the works of Italian authors; and only the perfect sanity of Shakspeare and the sturdy morality of the English nature prevented the Renaissance from following in England the downward course that it pursued in Italy. But since that time the breach between the Italian and the Anglo-Saxon has been constantly widening, and now there are few who speak our language that have any idea of the intellectual activity prevailing in Italy to-day, or of the new literature arising there, in which the realism of the French is so happily blended with something of the idealism of Dante and Petrarch. Yet it may be doubted whether the contemporary literature of any country will better repay the attention, especially of an age that is weary of French cynicism and German pedantry. And foremost among living Italian authors, for good or for evil, stands the name of Gabriele d'Annunzio.

Baudelaire's poetry has been aptly compared to a Parisian gutter, amongst whose filth and stench blossom strange flowers of a rare and delicate grace. The works of the young Italian genius who has flashed upon the world in the last few years may be likened to a beautiful tropical morass, filled with luxuriant vegetation and gorgeous flowers, peopled by birds of brilliant plumage and snakes with glittering scales, but whose air, so full of flashing butterflies and golden scarabs, is heavy with subtle poison. He is the most brilliant figure that has arisen in the last years of the dying century, and if he is a promise of what the next is to bring forth the outlook is as ominous as it is fascinating.

His chief characteristics are brilliancy and corruption. In all the range of Italian literature there is perhaps no such brilliant prose. It flashes like gems in the sunlight; it reminds one of the glories of summer sunsets, of strains of

delicious music. It is always of crystalline clearness, but it is full of subtle harmonies, of rich cadences that haunt the memory. In the Italian language d'Annunzio has an instrument of marvelous capacities, and he strikes it with the hand of a master, drawing from it strains that were never evoked before.

Perhaps no writer of equal talent is so corrupt. A distinguished French critic has said of him that he is a pagan of the days of Nero, and he might have added, worthy of the imperial court, a fit leader of the revels in the Golden House. But he has none of the brutality of Zola. D'Annunzio is an aristocrat to the finger-tips, and his is the elegant and polished corruption of the declining days of Greece and Rome. We feel that at the banquets of the Corinthian hetaerae or of Heliogabalus he would have been the guest of honor.

He reminds one of Theophile Gautier, of the worship of pagan beauty in Mlle. de Maupin and Fortunio and Arria Marcella; but his style is more brilliant, more varied, more passionate, more highly colored. And his scope is wider. With an appreciation of classic beauty that is equal to Gautier at his best, he combines an unsurpassed feeling for the strange graces, the undefined charm of the early Italian painters, those delicious primitives who are caviare to the vulgar, but who have so intense a fascination for the elect. If the characteristics of Guy de Maupassant and Pierre Loti could be combined with something of Ruskin, it would give a better idea of his work.

Even to those accustomed to the plainness of speech common among the Latin races the plainness of d'Annunzio's language, the frankness with which he depicts all the mysteries of passion, is amazing. Unless it be Pierre Louys' "Aphrodite," I know of nothing intended for public circulation where the fig-leaf is stripped so remorselessly from Nature's shame. But he is never coarse. He remains always the exquisite Sybarite, the refined voluptuary, and instead of the cold, glittering style in which Louys depicts the

corruption of ancient Alexandria, we have one whose rich coloring reminds us of the glories of Venetian painting, with an immodesty surpassing that of the voluptuous queen of the Adriatic.

By reason of his immodesty as well as because the graces of his style cannot be reproduced in another language, he can be understood and appreciated only in his own tongue. Imagination fails to depict the indignation of Mr. Comstock should one of these books fall into his hands. Some of d'Annunzio's novels have been translated into English, but the reader need not imagine that he gets in them the brilliant colors, the graceful forms or the subtle perfume of these poisonous flowers.

Born upon the Adriatic and brought up in the wilds of the Abbruzzi, he has a sense of the beauties of nature, of the charms of the mountains and the sea, of hill and vale and tinkling rivulet, rarely to be found in one so profoundly versed in the artificial life of great cities. His descriptions are gems, whether he describes the unfolding of a lily or the turbulent scenes of the religious pilgrimage in the "Triumph of Death"—a description which he seems to have penned to show how such a subject could be handled without the ponderous dullness of Zola's "Lourdes." And where will one find a description of music so powerful as his portrayal in the same book of Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde," that supreme cry of the passion-laden soul?

He began as all who seek a purely literary distinction should begin, with poetry; for of all means of mastering language the struggle with the perplexities of versification is the most efficient. Great poets are always masters of an exquisite prose, and many who, like Southey, have no poetic inspiration, have in this way gained a felicity of prose diction that has given them a permanent place in literature. And while the cadences of verse should be avoided in prose, in no other way does one acquire so sensitive an ear for the harmony of words.

He was but fifteen years of age when in 1879 he pub-

lished his first volume of poems, and compelled the world to recognize that in this boy a new force had arisen in literature with which the future would have to reckon. Since then his production in verse has been as constant as in prose, though different in character, and has won for him a place second only to Carducci among the living poets of Italy. But while his prose is of crystalline clearness, his verse is often hazy, with vague and indeterminate outlines. He has expressed the idea that verse should be distinguished chiefly for sound and rhythm, that like music it should be suggestive, and not pictorial. He is an accomplished English scholar, and a worshiper of Shelley, and in the richness of his diction and the occasional vagueness of his meaning he reminds one of Shelley's verse, while the sensuous and often immoral turn of his thoughts makes one think rather of Swinburne. And like Swinburne, though a wonderful tamer of sounds, so that he seems to have all the words in the language at his finger tips, his vocabulary is really not particularly extensive, and his effects are produced not by its profusion, but by the skill with which it is handled.

When we were boys we were continually admonished in the old rhetorics that of all virtues of style clearness was under every circumstance the first. But now all that is changed. An impressionist picture is not worthy of note if one can tell in less than half an hour whether it is a girl or a kangaroo that he is looking at, and among the most exasperating elements in our *fin de siècle* literature is its vague, misty impressionism. Though d'Annunzio's verse is always exquisite, the outlines of the pictures which it draws before the mind's eye are often dim, though sometimes as clear-cut as a carved gem. It is frequently only a cadence of sweet sounds, a suggestion of beautiful things, unrealized visions such as float before our eyes as we lie half awake listening to the songs of the birds greeting the morning sun, dreaming of passionate loves and bitter disenchantments. But he is never so great a sinner as Swinburne. He never requires a torrent of words to express an almost infinitesimal

idea. The trouble is that he frequently is content to suggest only the vaguest outlines of his thought ; but often, with the fewest and best chosen words, he draws a picture as firm and distinct as a steel engraving. A steady improvement is noticeable in his verse, and he may yet attain to a perfection as great as that of Leopardi or Carducci, though necessarily in a different way.

In prose he is *facile princeps*. That he had no superior among his fellows became apparent upon the publication when a very young man of his "Piacere" (Pleasure). It is a sad book showing the bitter lees that ever lie at the bottom of pleasure's tempting cup — the record of the career of a brilliant young man of the Roman aristocracy, going from one facile amour to another until there comes that hardening of the heart which Burns recognizes as the worst effect of immorality, so that he can no longer feel even for the one woman who loves him with a true though guilty love, while he is devoured with an unavailing desire for the most corrupt siren that he has known. And the book leaves him so, hungering vainly for one who has passed on to other embraces, incapable of any genuine feeling, disillusioned, blasted, wrecked, an empty hulk drifting aimlessly upon the sea of life.

His next work, "Giovanni Episcopo," is a study of crime worthy of Dostoyevski. It is the story of a poor, weak creature, the *âme damnée* of a strong, brutal bully named Wanzer, at whose command he marries a beautiful and abandoned woman ; of his shame, his degradation, his weak compliance, of his love for his poor child which at last stirs him to revolt and to the murder of his tormentors. It is a horrible book, a loathsome night-mare, but powerful and fascinating to an unusual degree.

But of all studies in criminal psychology "L'Innocente" is perhaps entitled to the highest rank. There is probably no story in which the tortures of a damned soul are depicted with such realistic force. To be forever faithless to a wife forever faithful is the dream of the libertine "Tullio Hermil."

The time comes when, stirred by jealousy, his old love revives, but it is too late. The noble woman whom he has betrayed, neglected, outraged, though still loving him with all her heart, in a moment of despairing weakness has yielded to another. The suspicion, the doubt, the fearful certainty, the long agony, the birth of the child which is not his but which must bear his name and usurp his titles, the bitterness, the despair and the last awful crime, are told with an utter disregard of the decencies of life but with a realistic power that stands unrivaled. It is morbid, unwholesome, revolting, but unspeakably vivid.

In "*Il Trionfo della Morte*" (The Triumph of Death) he turns again to the lees that lie at the bottom of passion's cup, but this time it is the hate that grows up in the breast of man as the flame of passion flickers to its socket against the woman who has dragged him down, whose Delilah charms have robbed him of his strength, the tomb's allurements for the shattered nerves of the exhausted voluptuary.

The last of his books, "*Le Vergine delle Rocce*" (The Virgins of the Rocks) is perhaps the most perfect, certainly the most charming. In it alone there is nothing to offend the reader's modesty.

Faithful to the exiled Bourbon King, an old nobleman has retired to his castle standing before a strange volcanic rock in remotest Sicily. With him are his insane wife, who bedecks her horrible form in the finery of the court and has herself carried about in a sedan chair, his two sons slowly following their mother into the gulf of insanity, and his daughters, Massimilla, the Saint, Vialante, the Venus, and Anatolia, the Heroine. Here the hero, whose childhood had been passed on his neighboring estates, weary of the pleasures of Rome, comes for rest and peace. Toward him, the one young man of their own rank who enlivens their solitude, the only one who can break their bonds and lead them forth to liberty, to love, to life, the hearts of all three are turned. Which shall he choose? Massimilla attracts him by her blind devotion, by her yearning for self-surrender

and obedience, for absolute absorption into the being of the man she loves. Violante—Palma Vecchio's Violante—stirs his senses profoundly by her glorious pagan beauty, her infinite capacity for pagan joy. But at last he wisely chooses the noble Anatolia, born to be the mother of heroes, to bear her husband ever upward on the path to glory and honor. Upon a mountain top, amid fantastic rocks, he asks her for her hand. Before her she sees love, freedom, happiness, an opening for her noble ambitions; but she thinks of her aged father, her insane mother, her brothers hanging upon the brink of the abyss, of the crumbling house of which she is the support and stay, and with a breaking heart she tells him no, as Violante, aflame with jealousy, breaks in upon them.

Here the volume, which is to be but the first of a trio, comes to an end. The motto of the book and the headings of each chapter are from the works of Leonardo da Vinci, and it must be owned that there is about it something of the subtle charm of the "Madonna of Rocks," of the unfathomable smile of the "Mona Lisa."

When d'Annunzio first appeared it was predicted that his unexampled precocity would be followed by a premature decay; but so far, both in his prose and in his poetry, there has been a steady improvement. The harmony of his verse has continually gained in richness, while its meaning has become clearer as he has won a fuller mastery over the instrument that makes his music. His prose has gained in strength, in flexibility, in warmth and brilliancy of coloring. The morbid and unwholesome tinge still hangs over his work, but his last book offers the hope that with his youth this dross may pass away, and the pure gold of exquisite diction and subtle thought alone remain. Whether he is to be merely a baleful comet or a fixed star in the literary heavens cannot yet be determined; but if he continues his progress toward higher ideals and perfection of form his position must soon be established.

G. B. ROSE.